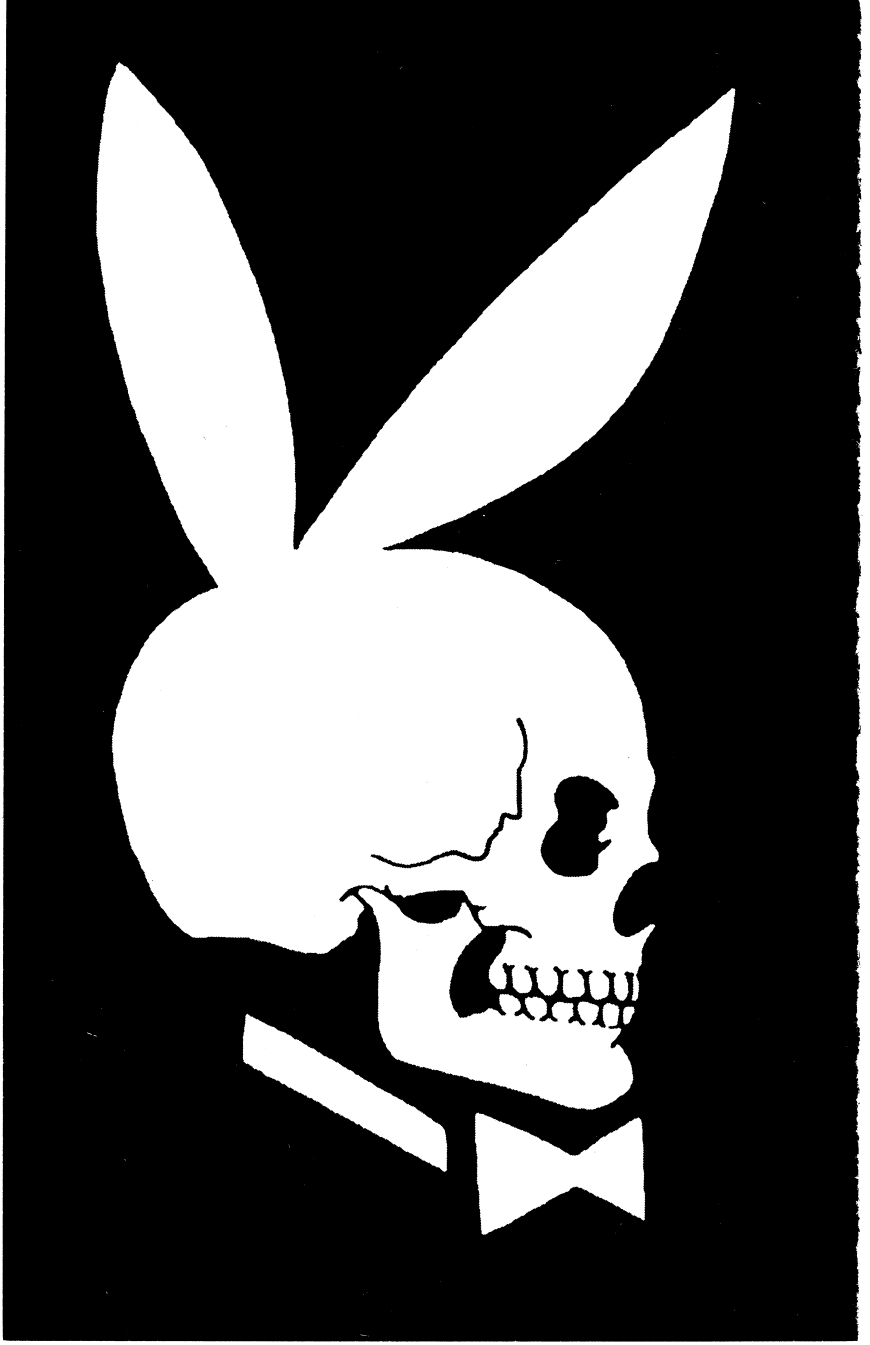


Jonathan Monk (JM)

Jonathan Monk is a Berlin-based conceptual artist whose practice travels across printed matter, multiples, sculpture, and installation. Monk often works with ideas of copying and appropriation, recalling conceptual masters of the past all while adding his own blend of wit and humor. In one notable ongoing project, Monk auctions off drawings of iconic works of art on restaurant receipts to his followers on Instagram, all for only the price of the meal. The charming series of works and method of distribution illustrates how objects can become a connective thread between fandom, access, and community. In another series of works titled *Exhibit Model*, Monk displays images of his previous shows as wallpaper, a process of bootlegging oneself where any notion of "an original" begins to dissipate. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

BS: I don't think I've seen your work framed as bootlegging directly, but I do feel it explores similar ideas (copying, appropriation, fandom, shifting contexts, subverting economies, etc). Is bootlegging something you consider in your work?

JM: My initial contact with the idea of bootlegging came in the early 1980s when I acquired an illegally recorded Smiths concert on vinyl. It all felt very under the counter and the recording was excitingly crude. Bootlegging seemed only to be related to music and film. I remember VHS tapes being passed around at school not exactly sure what was on them as we didn't have a video player. The idea of copying something and making it available seemed appropriate at the time. The notion today does appear to have lost some of its guilty pleasure.

> BS: When discussing your work, it is often framed as appropriation or even "cover versions." I'm curious if and how you differentiate between the ideas of appropriation and bootlegging.

JM: I'm never really sure about this. I think my work does try and move the idea (whatever it happens to be) further. I generally try not to simply replicate a work, an idea, or a situation. I once produced an edition with Michèle Didier in Brussels (now Paris) in 2010. The idea was to make a facsimile copy of *Diecimila* (1977) by Chris Burden, which in itself was an exact copy of an Italian bank note. We even fabricated the green display folder the edition was housed in. My name did not appear anywhere on the work; even Burden's signature was painstakingly recreated in pencil. Burden forged money and we forged his work. I liked the idea that in the future my piece might mistakenly be sold as his and it was feasible the opposite could happen, although unlikely. This may or may not answer your question...

BS: I've often come to appreciate a subject more through the eyes of a fan than directly from the subject itself. It was pointed out to me that Barthes notes a similar idea in *Camera Lucida*: "One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor." How do you think our understanding of a subject changes when seen from the perspective of an admirer?

JM: Beautiful. I guess we are all slowly getting used to seeing the world through a system of carefully curated filters. Our knowledge of a subject depends on how or where information was gleaned—John Peel was a very good promoter; google might not be.

I remember a family visit to the Tate in London—I was probably around twelve at the time. Standing in front of a van Gogh, I recall not the beauty of the work but the realization that I was standing exactly the same distance away from the work as Vincent was when he painted it.

BS: Bootlegging is closely related to ideas of fandom. In your work, for example, you are clearly a huge admirer of the art you're referencing. I'm curious, at what point do you consider that a creation moves from an homage to an artwork? Is there a difference?

JM: If I knew this I could (and probably should) retire. I think each project has a slightly different outcome

and it is already hard to say when something is or is not art. If I'm able to continue what I do without having to legitimize my every move, then great...

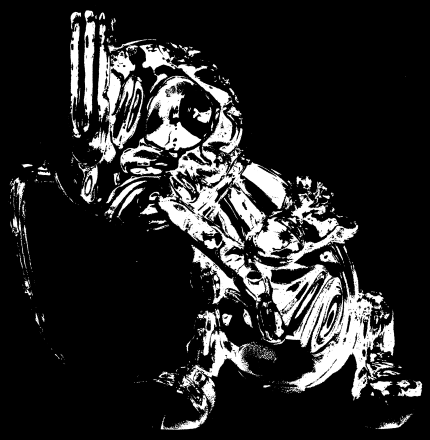
> BS: The particular period of conceptual art that you often work with is known for its cold, administrative qualities. Bootlegging I would argue can be a very personal gesture in the way that it reveals love, admiration, and even obsession for a particular subject. *Relief*, for example, touches on these dry sensibilities, but in fact reveals something entirely intimate... your private collection, your affinity for LeWitt, et cetera. Does it feel important for you that a personal narrative comes through in the work?

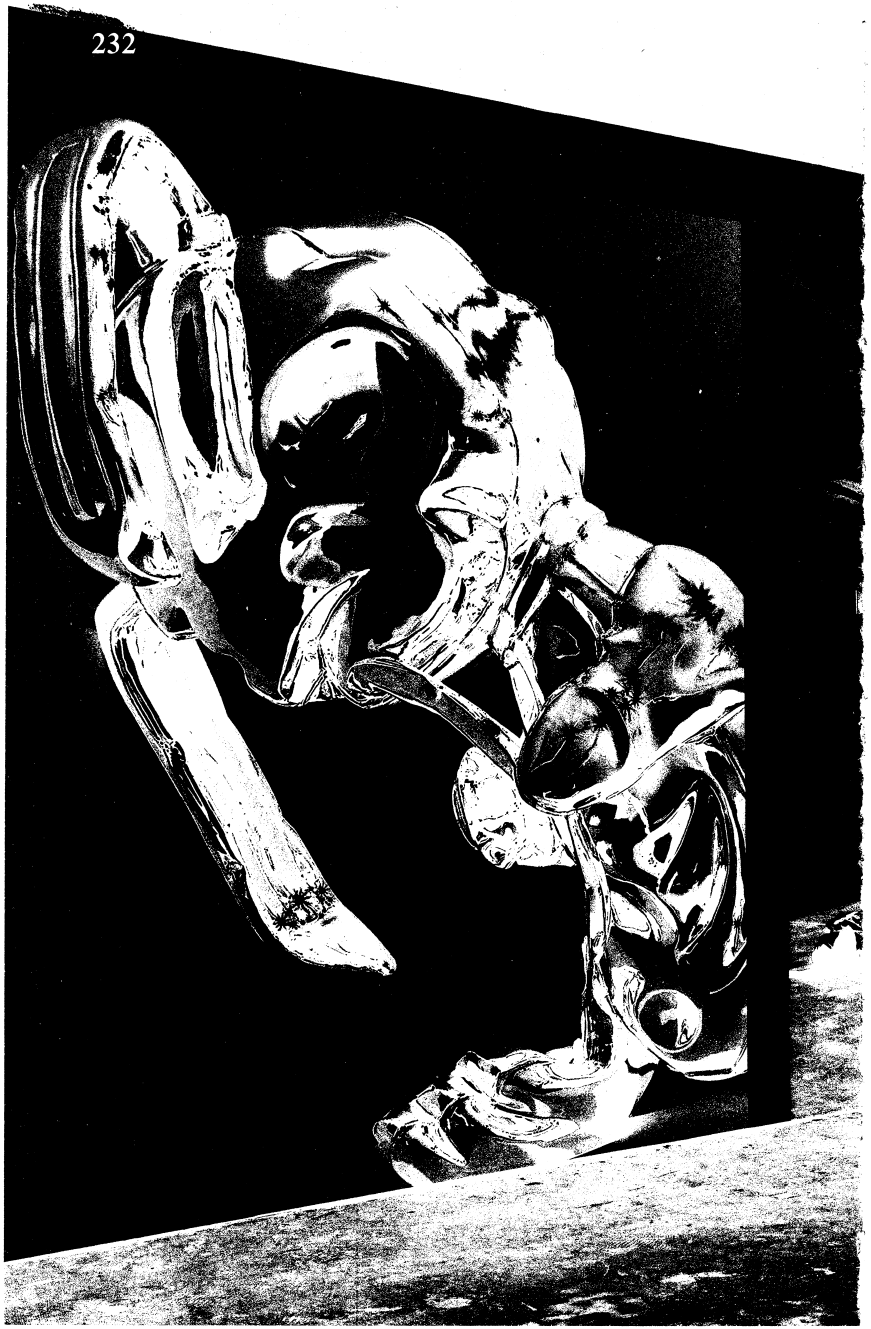
JM: Often, but not always. The particular piece you mention was supposed to be quite a cold reflection on LeWitt and his books. But the fabricator left some of the production process in the piece, so the book shapes appeared to be used or slightly off white. I liked this accidental addition, so I left it.

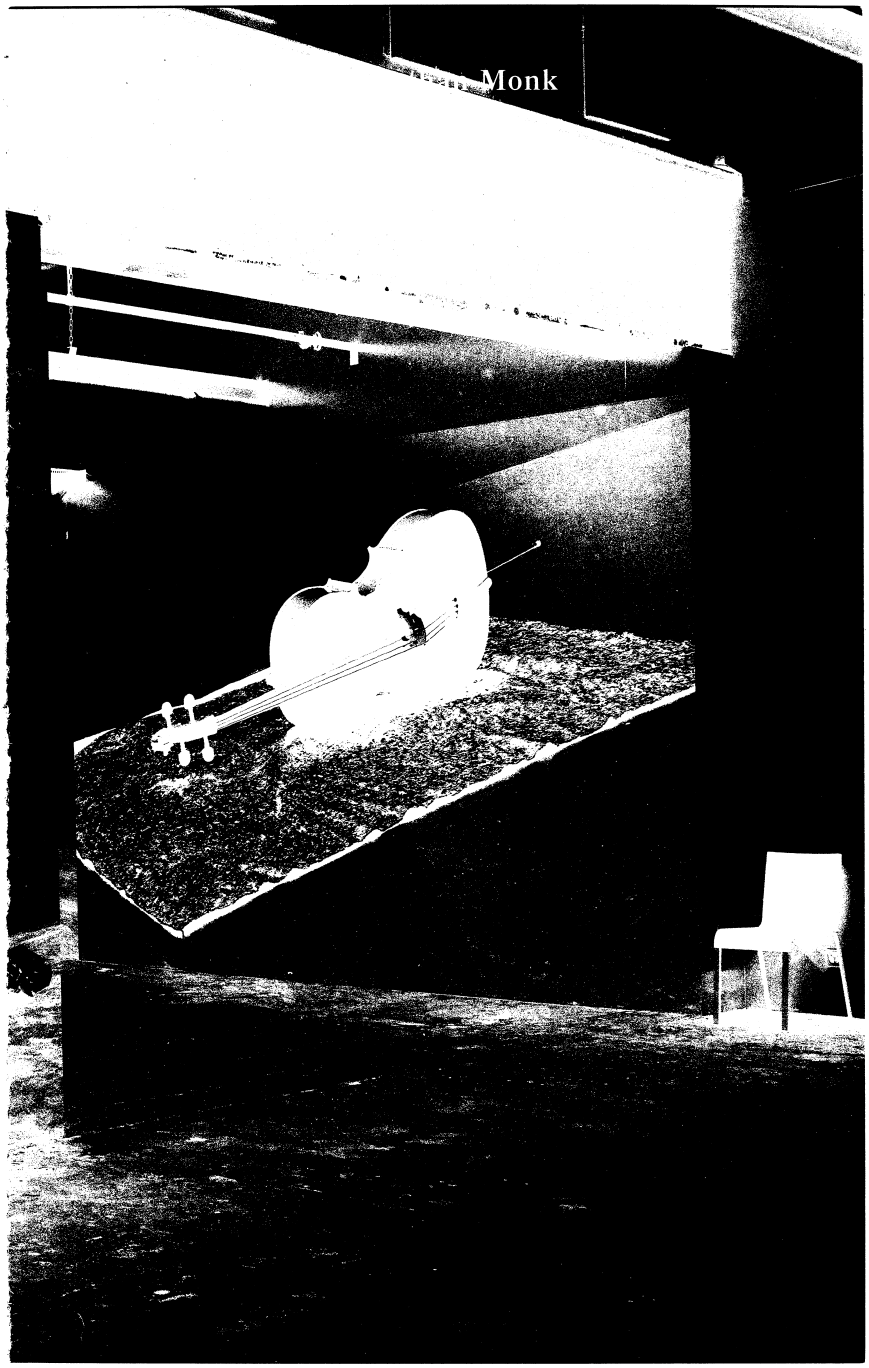
> BS: Do you think it is possible to bootleg oneself? Or perhaps an equivalent question is, is art ever original? I think your project *Exhibit Model* raises questions akin to this. If I'm onto something, what might that mean for this particular body of work?

JM: I do. In 2008, I made a series of sculptures, *Deflated Sculptures I-V*, based on *Rabbit* (1986) by Jeff

p. 231: Jonathan Monk, *Deflated Sculpture II* (2009)



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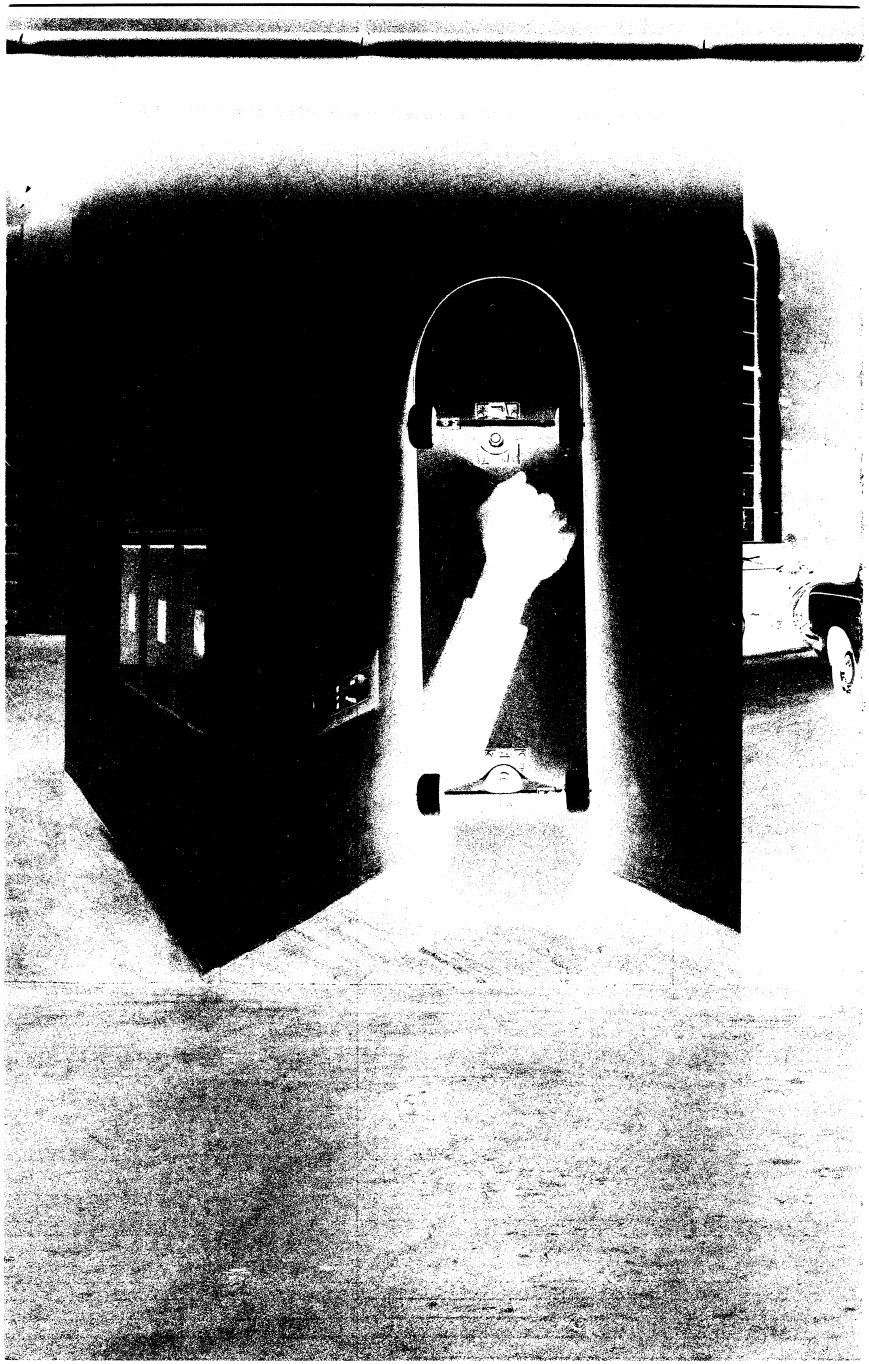

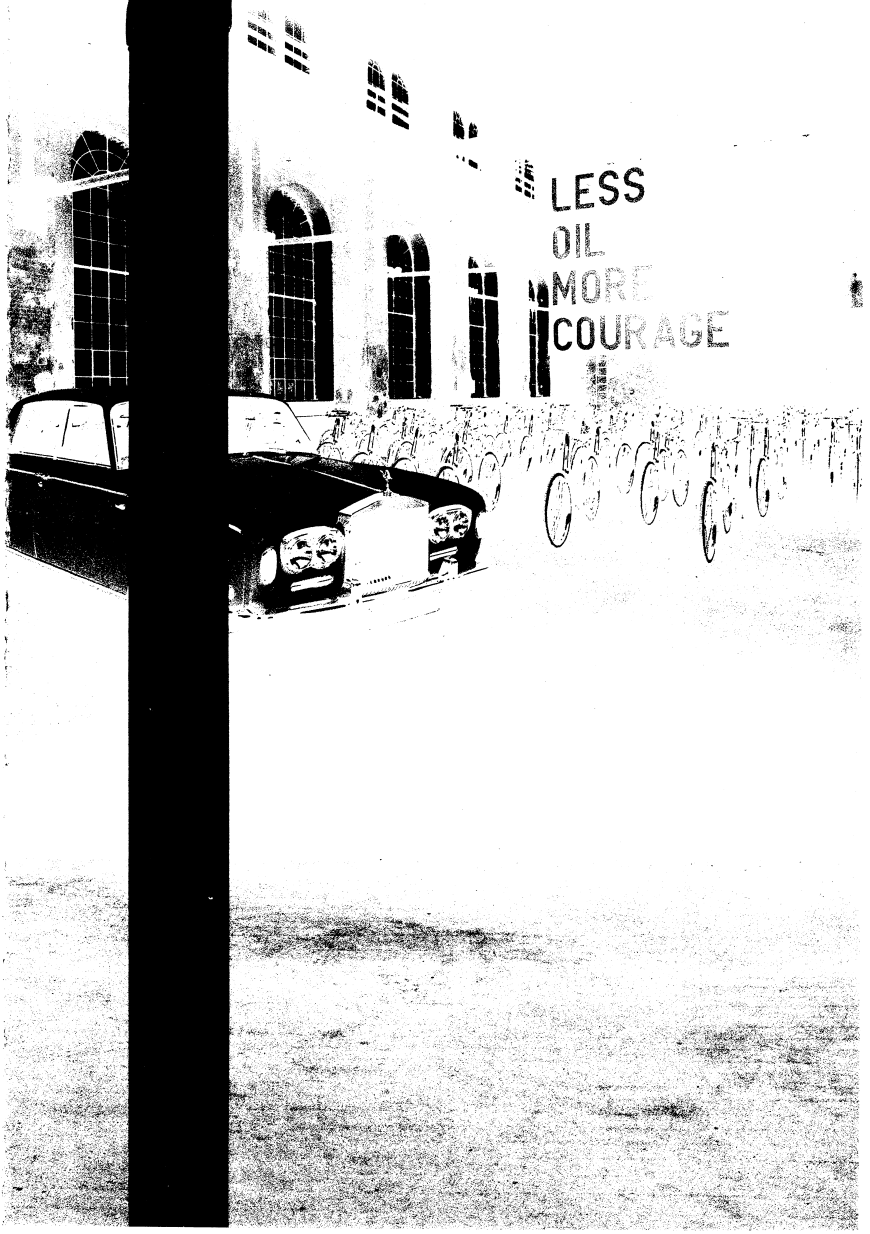
LESS
OIL
MORE
COURAGE

Koons. These were all fabricated in China, based on images of the original Koons sculpture and pictures I'd taken of an actual inflatable toy rabbit. Recently, I made new versions in China based on my own *Deflated Sculptures*. The *Exhibit Model* project, I guess, uses a similar narrative of copying and reappropriating. I like how the initial idea slowly disintegrates or vanishes into the background.

> BS: In many situations, bootlegging provides a means of access. In fashion, for example, a bootleg is often a way to own a version of a more expensive luxury item. While there are several interesting ideas at play with your *Restaurant Drawings* series, I wanted to ask specifically about its price point. Are you interested in the way these drawings undermine the economic aspects of the art world? That now, essentially, you can buy a Christopher Wool or an Ed Ruscha for the price of a meal?

JM: I'm not sure they really undermine the economic aspects of the art world. I occasionally think the project will come back and haunt me, although I don't really have a problem with this. It is part of the game, illogical as it might sound in relation to my market value—this is something that I always found quite funny. Money aside, it might be easier to buy an actual Christopher Wool work than one of my *Restaurant Drawings* that pictures one of his paintings [due to a process of selecting who can buy the piece from their Instagram comments]. It is a com-

pp. 232–235: Jonathan Monk, *Exhibit Model One* (2016)

pletely different world though—comparisons are not so easy.

> BS: To me, *Deflated Sculpture* (2009) feels like a rare instance in your practice of bootlegging as a form of direct critique. Do you feel like bootlegging or appropriation is still a potent form of subversion?

JM: Although these works were not intended as a direct critique, the 2008 market crash and subsequent aftermath added to the deflating context. I was really just trying to add a touch of reality to the dialogue.

> BS: You're often asked about the importance or relevance of originality. I think with bootlegging, there is almost a desire to be unoriginal in the effort to replicate, as best as possible, something else. Rather than ask about the value of originality, I wanted to ask what you feel that we learn from copying?

JM: A rereading of the past. The post-conceptual artists lead me to the conceptual artists, and so on. After art school, I made a multiple entitled *Learn To See How Others See*. I had slowly acquired old prescription spectacles via flea markets and secondhand shops. The glasses of others were numbered and boxed. I'm not sure how many pieces were in the edition or what happened to them. I'm losing focus.

pp. 238–239: Various photographs sourced from Jonathan Monk's Instagram account (@monkpictures)
Title page (p. 226): Graphic from a *Restaurant Drawing* by Jonathan Monk of Richard Prince's *Skull Bunny* (c. 1991)

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2x Cocktail 7,00 € 14,00 €
2x Piccola pasticce 5,00 € 10,00 €
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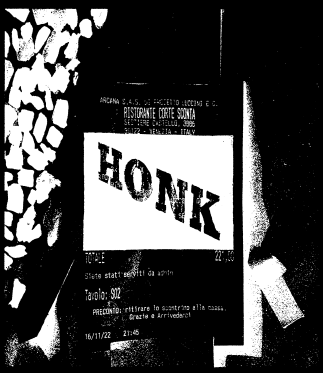
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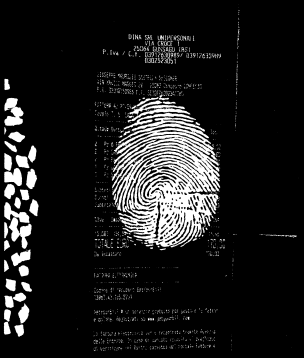

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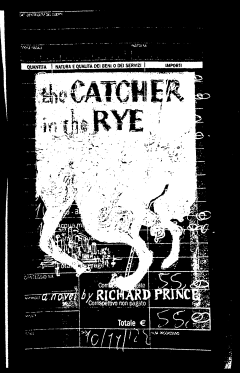
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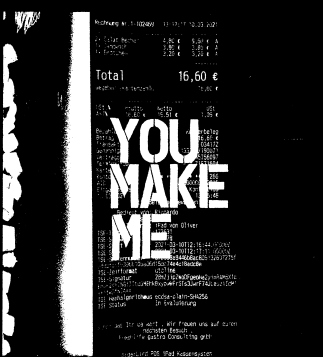
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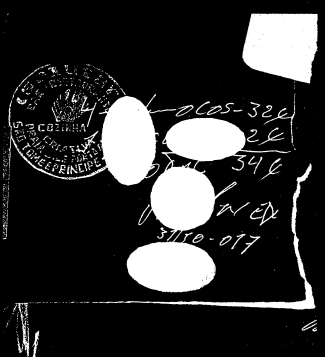
YOU MAKE ME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